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## Listening



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It was a hot afternoon in May. The professor of ancient history was lecturing on the fall of the Roman Empire. She began: “Yesterday we discussed the political and social conditions that weakened the empire from within. Today we will talk about the invasions that attacked the empire from the outside—the Visigoths from the northwest, the Ostrogoths from the northeast, the Vandals from the south, the Huns from the west, and Homer Simpson from the southeast.”

Nobody batted an eye. Nobody looked up. The classroom was quiet, except for the scratch of pens as the students took notes—presumably recording Homer Simpson as an invader of the Roman Empire.

### hearing

The vibration of sound waves on the eardrums and the firing of electrochemical impulses in the brain.

### listening

Paying close attention to, and making sense of, what we hear.

This story illustrates what one research study after another has revealed—most people are shockingly poor listeners. We fake paying attention. We can look right at someone, appear interested in what that person says, even nod our head or smile at the appropriate moments—all without really listening.

Not listening doesn’t mean we don’t hear. *Hearing* is a physiological process, involving the vibration of sound waves on our eardrums and the firing of electrochemical impulses from the inner ear to the central auditory system of the brain. But *listening* involves paying close attention to, and making sense of, what we hear. Even when we think we are listening carefully, we usually grasp only 50 percent of what we hear. After 24 hours we can remember only 10 percent of the original message.<sup>1</sup> It’s little wonder that listening has been called a lost art.<sup>2</sup>

## Listening Is Important

Although most people listen poorly, there are exceptions. Top-flight business executives, successful politicians, brilliant teachers—nearly all are excellent listeners.<sup>3</sup> So much of what they do depends on absorbing information that is given verbally—and absorbing it quickly and accurately. If you had an interview with the president of a major corporation, you might be shocked (and flattered) to see how closely that person listened to your words.

In our communication-oriented age, listening is more important than ever. This is why, in most companies, effective listeners hold higher positions and are promoted more often than ineffective listeners.<sup>4</sup> When business managers are asked to rank-order the communication skills most crucial to their jobs, they usually rank listening number one.<sup>5</sup> Listening is so important that in one survey of America’s Fortune 500 companies, almost 60 percent of the respondents said they provide some kind of listening training for their employees.<sup>6</sup>

Even if you don’t plan to be a corporate executive, the art of listening can be helpful in almost every part of your life. This is not surprising when you realize that people spend more time listening than doing any other communicative activity—more than reading, more than writing, more even than speaking.

Think for a moment about your own life as a college student. Close to 90 percent of class time in U.S. colleges and universities is spent listening to discussions and lectures. A number of studies have shown a strong correlation between listening and academic success. Students with the highest grades are usually those with the strongest listening skills. The reverse is also true—students with the lowest grades are usually those with the weakest listening skills.<sup>7</sup>

There is plenty of reason, then, to take listening seriously. Employers and employees, parents and children, wives and husbands, doctors and patients, students and teachers—all depend on the apparently simple skill of listening. Regardless of your profession or walk of life, you never escape the need for a well-trained ear.

Listening is also important to you as a speaker. It is probably the way you get most of your ideas and information—from television, radio, conversation, and lectures. If you do not listen well, you will not understand what you hear and may pass along your misunderstanding to others.

Besides, in class—as in life—you will listen to many more speeches than you give. It is only fair to pay close attention to your classmates' speeches; after all, you want them to listen carefully to *your* speeches. An excellent way to improve your own speeches is to listen attentively to the speeches of other people. Over and over, teachers find that the best speakers are usually the best listeners.

A side benefit of your speech class is that it offers an ideal opportunity to work on the art of listening. During the 95 percent of the time when you are not speaking, you have nothing else to do but listen and learn. You can sit there like a stone—or you can use the time profitably to master a skill that will serve you in a thousand ways.

## Listening and Critical Thinking

One of the ways listening can serve you is by enhancing your skills as a critical thinker. We can identify four kinds of listening:<sup>8</sup>

- *Appreciative listening*—listening for pleasure or enjoyment, as when we listen to music, to a comedy routine, or to an entertaining speech.
- *Empathic listening*—listening to provide emotional support for the speaker, as when a psychiatrist listens to a patient or when we lend a sympathetic ear to a friend in distress.
- *Comprehensive listening*—listening to understand the message of a speaker, as when we attend a classroom lecture or listen to directions for finding a friend's house.
- *Critical listening*—listening to evaluate a message for purposes of accepting or rejecting it, as when we listen to the sales pitch of a used-car dealer or the campaign speech of a political candidate.

Although all four kinds of listening are important, this chapter deals primarily with comprehensive listening and critical listening. They are the kinds of listening you will use most often when listening to speeches in class, when taking lecture notes in other courses, when communicating at work, and when responding to the barrage of commercials, political messages, and other persuasive appeals you face every day. They are also the kinds of listening that are most closely tied to critical thinking.

As we saw in Chapter 1, critical thinking involves a number of skills. Some of those skills—summarizing information, recalling facts, distinguishing main points from minor points—are central to comprehensive listening. Other skills

**appreciative listening**  
Listening for pleasure or enjoyment.

**empathic listening**  
Listening to provide emotional support for a speaker.

**comprehensive listening**  
Listening to understand the message of a speaker.

**critical listening**  
Listening to evaluate a message for purposes of accepting or rejecting it.

of critical thinking—separating fact from opinion, spotting weaknesses in reasoning, judging the soundness of evidence—are especially important in critical listening. When you engage in comprehensive listening or critical listening, you must use your mind as well as your ears. When your mind is not actively involved, you may be hearing, but you are not *listening*. In fact, listening and critical thinking are so closely allied that training in listening is also training in how to think.<sup>9</sup>

At the end of this chapter, we'll discuss steps you can take to improve your skills in comprehensive and critical listening. If you follow these steps, you may also become a better critical thinker.

## Four Causes of Poor Listening

### spare “brain time”

The difference between the rate at which most people talk (120 to 150 words a minute) and the rate at which the brain can process language (400 to 800 words a minute).

### NOT CONCENTRATING

The brain is incredibly efficient. Although we talk at a rate of 120 to 150 words a minute, the brain can process 400 to 800 words a minute.<sup>10</sup> This would seem to make listening very easy, but actually it has the opposite effect. Because we can process a speaker's words and still have plenty of spare “brain time,” we are tempted to interrupt our listening by thinking about other things. Here's what happens:

Elena Kim works in the public communications department of a large financial services company. She attends regular staff meetings with the communications director. The meetings provide necessary information, but sometimes they seem to go on forever.

This morning the director is talking about tax-exempt college savings accounts and how to publicize them more effectively. “We've succeeded in reaching parents, so our next target market is grandparents who want to put away money for their grandchildren's education...”

“Grandparents,” Elena thinks. “It was always great to see my grandparents when I was growing up. When I spoke to them over the weekend, Grandma didn't sound very good. I have to call them more often. . . .”

Elena snaps herself back to the meeting. The director is talking about the company's new executive vice president, who has just moved to headquarters from a regional firm in Florida. “Mr. Fernandez has never worked in a company this size, but his experience in Florida . . .”

“Florida,” Elena dreams. “Sun, endless beaches, and the club scene in South Beach. Maybe I can snatch a few days' vacation in January. . . .”

Sternly, Elena pulls her attention back to the meeting. The communications director is now discussing the company's latest plan for public-service announcements. Elena is not involved in the plan, and her attention wanders once more.

That morning she had another argument with her roommate about cleaning the kitchen and taking out the garbage. Maybe it's time to decide if she can afford to live without a roommate. It sure would make for fewer hassles.

“. . . an area Elena has researched extensively,” the director is saying. Uh oh! *What* area does the director mean? Everyone looks at Elena, as she frantically tries to recall the last words said at the meeting.

It's not that Elena *meant* to lose track of the discussion. But there comes a point at which it's so easy to let your thoughts wander rather than to concentrate on what is being said. After all, concentrating is hard work. Louis Nizer, the famous trial lawyer, says, “So complete is this concentration that at the end



People spend more time listening than in any other communicative activity. One benefit of your speech class is that it can improve your listening skills in a variety of situations.

of a court day in which I have only listened, I find myself wringing wet despite a calm and casual manner.”<sup>11</sup>

Later in this chapter, we will look at some things you can do to concentrate better on what you hear.

## LISTENING TOO HARD

Until now we have been talking about not paying close attention to what we hear. But sometimes we listen *too* hard. We turn into human sponges, soaking up a speaker’s every word as if every word were equally important. We try to remember all the names, all the dates, all the places. In the process we often miss the speaker’s main point. What is worse, we may end up confusing the facts as well.

Shortly after graduating from college, Erik Waldman landed an excellent job at a graphics design firm. Knowing he had never been good at budgeting his money, he was determined to begin thinking about his long-range economic future. When his employer circulated an e-mail announcing a financial planning workshop, Erik signed up right away.

The first session was about retirement planning. Simone Fisher, who was conducting the workshop, explained that 7 of 10 Americans between the ages of 22 and 35 do not have either a monthly budget or a regular savings plan. Erik wrote down every number Simone mentioned.

“If you want to have a retirement income equal to 75 percent of your current salary,” Simone continued, “you will need to invest at least 6 percent of your present earnings, and beyond that you need to figure in future inflation rates. We have set aside time this afternoon to meet with you personally to calculate your individual savings needs. In the meantime, I want to stress that the most important thing is to start saving now.”

Erik wrote furiously to record all the statistics Simone cited. When she opened the floor for questions, Erik raised his hand and said, “I have two questions. When is the best time to start saving for retirement? And how am I supposed to figure out my savings target if I don’t know what inflation rates will be in the future?”

This is a typical example of losing the speaker's point by concentrating on details. Erik had fixed his mind on remembering all the statistics in Simone's presentation, but he blocked out the main message—that it is best to start saving now and that he would get help developing an individual plan.

Rather than trying to remember everything a speaker says, efficient listeners usually concentrate on main ideas and evidence. We'll discuss these things more thoroughly later in the chapter.

## JUMPING TO CONCLUSIONS

Renee Collins, a recent college graduate, took a job as an editorial assistant in the research department of a regional magazine. Shortly after Renee arrived, the editor in charge of the research department left the magazine for another job. For the next two months, Renee struggled to handle the work of the research department by herself. She often felt in over her head, but she knew this was a good opportunity to learn, and she hated to give up her new responsibilities.

One day Duane Perkins, the editor in chief of the magazine, comes into Renee's office to talk. The following conversation takes place:

Duane: You've done a great job these last two months, Renee. But you know we really need a new editor. So we've decided to make some changes.

Renee: I'm not surprised. I know I've made my share of mistakes.

Duane: Everyone makes mistakes when they're starting out. And you've been carrying a lot of responsibility. Too much. That's why . . .

Renee: That's okay. I'm grateful to have had a chance to try my hand at this. I know I'm inexperienced, and this is an important department.

Duane: Yes, it is. And it's not an easy job. We really need an editor and an assistant to handle all the work. That's why I wanted to tell you . . .

Renee: You're right, of course. I hope you've found somebody good to be the new editor.

Duane: I think so. But, Renee, I don't think you understand . . .

Renee: No, I understand. I knew all along that I was just filling in.

Duane: Renee, you're not listening.

Renee: Yes, I am. You're trying to be nice, but you're here to tell me that you've hired a new editor and I'll be going back to my old job.

Duane: No, that's not it at all. I think you've done a fine job under difficult circumstances. You've proved yourself, and I intend to make *you* the editor. But I think you'll need an assistant to help you.

Why is there so much confusion here? Clearly, Renee is unsure about her future at the magazine. So when Duane starts to talk about making some changes, Renee jumps to a conclusion and assumes the worst. The misunderstanding could have been avoided if, when Duane had said, "We've decided to make some changes," Renee had asked, "What changes?"—and then *listened*.

This is one form of jumping to conclusions—putting words into a speaker's mouth. It is one reason why we sometimes communicate so poorly with people we are closest to. Because we're so sure we know what they mean, we don't listen to what they actually say.

Another way of jumping to conclusions is prematurely rejecting a speaker's ideas as boring or misguided. We may decide early on that a speaker has nothing valuable to say. Suppose you think fraternities and sororities are a valuable addition to a college's social and civic life, but a speaker's announced topic is "The Greek System: An Institution Whose Time Is Past?" You may decide in advance not to listen to the speaker. That would be a mistake. You might pick up information that could strengthen or modify your thinking. In another situation, you might jump to the conclusion that a topic is boring. Let's say the announced topic is "Architecture and History." It sounds dull. So you tune out—and miss a fascinating discussion filled with human-interest stories about buildings and other structures from the ancient pyramids to the latest skyscrapers.

Nearly every speech has something to offer you—whether it be information, point of view, or technique. You are cheating yourself if you prejudge and choose not to listen.

## FOCUSING ON DELIVERY AND PERSONAL APPEARANCE

Avid readers of American history, Greg and Marissa were thrilled when they saw a poster at their local bookstore advertising a lecture by the author of a new book on the Battle of Gettysburg. The book had received good reviews, and Greg and Marissa made plans to attend the lecture.

Arriving at the bookstore, they took their seats and listened while the speaker discussed his research and major findings. "That was great," Marissa exclaimed when they got back to the car. But Greg was scowling. "What's wrong?" Marissa asked.

"I know you're going to think this is stupid," Greg began. "The guy was a decent speaker, and he seemed to know his stuff. But did you see the sport coat he was wearing? It's so retro—and his tie was atrocious. No matter how I tried, I couldn't stop thinking I was watching someone from *That '70s Show*."

This story illustrates a common problem. Sometimes we judge people by the way they look or speak and don't listen to what they say. It's easy to become distracted by a speaker's accent, personal appearance, or vocal mannerisms and lose sight of the message. Focusing on a speaker's delivery or personal appearance is one of the major sources of interference in the speech communication process, and it is something we always need to guard against.

## How to Become a Better Listener

### TAKE LISTENING SERIOUSLY

The first step toward becoming a better listener is to accord listening the seriousness it deserves. Good listeners are not born that way. They have *worked* at learning how to listen effectively. Good listening does not go hand in hand with intelligence, education, or social standing. Like any other skill, it comes from practice and self-discipline. Check your current skills as a listener by completing the Listening Self-Evaluation Worksheet on page 54 (Figure 3.1).<sup>12</sup> Once you have identified your shortcomings as a listener, make a serious effort to overcome them.

# LISTENING SELF-EVALUATION

*How often do you indulge in the following 10 bad listening habits? Check yourself carefully in each one.*

HABIT	FREQUENCY					SCORE
	Almost Always	Usually	Sometimes	Seldom	Almost never	
1. Giving in to mental distractions	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
2. Giving in to physical distractions	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
3. Trying to recall everything a speaker says	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
4. Rejecting a topic as uninteresting before hearing the speaker	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
5. Faking paying attention	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
6. Jumping to conclusions about a speaker's meaning	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
7. Deciding a speaker is wrong before hearing everything she or he has to say	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
8. Judging a speaker on personal appearance	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
9. Not paying attention to a speaker's evidence	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
10. Focusing on delivery rather than on what the speaker says	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
<b>TOTAL</b>						_____

**How to score:**

- For every "almost always" checked, give yourself a score of 2
- For every "usually" checked, give yourself a score of 4
- For every "sometimes" checked, give yourself a score of 6
- For every "seldom" checked, give yourself a score of 8
- For every "almost never" checked, give yourself a score of 10

**Total score interpretation:**

Below 70	You need lots of training in listening.
From 71–90	You listen well.
Above 90	You listen exceptionally well.

• **FIGURE 3.1**



Effective listeners take their task seriously. If you approach listening as an active process, you will significantly sharpen your powers of concentration and comprehension.

## BAN ACTIVE LISTENER

So many aspects of modern life encourage us to listen passively. We listen to our iPods while studying. Parents listen to their children while fixing dinner. Television reporters listen to a politician's speech while walking around the auditorium looking for their next interview.

This type of passive listening is a habit—but so is active listening. Active listeners give their undivided attention to the speaker in a genuine effort to understand his or her point of view. In conversation, they do not interrupt the speaker or finish his or her sentences. When listening to a speech, they do not allow themselves to be distracted by internal or external interference, and they do not prejudge the speaker. They take listening seriously and do the best they can to stay focused on the speaker and his or her message.

There are a number of steps you can take to improve your skills of active listening. They include resisting distractions, not allowing yourself to be diverted by a speaker's appearance or delivery, suspending judgment until you have heard the speaker out, focusing your listening, and developing note-taking skills. We'll discuss each of these in turn.

## RESIST DISTRACTIONS

In an ideal world, we could eliminate all physical and mental distractions. In the real world, however, we cannot. Because we think so much faster than a speaker can talk, it's easy to let our attention wander. Sometimes it's very easy—when the room is too hot, when construction machinery is operating right outside the window, when the speaker is tedious. But our attention can stray even in the best of circumstances—if for no other reason than a failure to stay alert and make ourselves concentrate.

Whenever you find this happening, make a conscious effort to pull your mind back to what the speaker is saying. Then force it to stay there. One way to do this is to think ahead of the speaker—try to anticipate what will come next. This is not the same as jumping to conclusions. When you jump to conclusions, you put words into the speaker's mouth and don't listen to what is said. In this case you *will* listen—and measure what the speaker says against what you had anticipated.

**active listening**  
Giving undivided attention to a speaker in a genuine effort to understand the speaker's point of view.



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The Listening Self-Evaluation Worksheet is available in the online Speech Tools for this chapter.

Another way to keep your mind on a speech is to review mentally what the speaker has already said and make sure you understand it. Yet another is to listen between the lines and assess what a speaker implies verbally or says nonverbally with body language. Suppose a speaker is introducing someone to an audience. The speaker says, “It gives me great pleasure to present to you my very dear friend, Nadine Zussman.” But the speaker doesn’t shake hands with Nadine. He doesn’t even look at her—just turns his back and leaves the podium. Is Nadine really his “very dear friend”? Certainly not.

Attentive listeners can pick up all kinds of clues to a speaker’s real message. At first you may find it difficult to listen so intently. If you work at it, however, your concentration is bound to improve.

### **DON’T BE DIVERTED BY APPEARANCE OR DELIVERY**

If you had attended Abraham Lincoln’s momentous Cooper Union speech of 1860, this is what you would have seen:

The long, ungainly figure upon which hung clothes that, while new for this trip, were evidently the work of an unskilled tailor; the large feet and clumsy hands, of which, at the outset, at least, the orator seemed to be unduly conscious; the long, gaunt head, capped by a shock of hair that seemed not to have been thoroughly brushed out, made a picture which did not fit in with New York’s conception of a finished statesman.<sup>13</sup>

But although he seemed awkward and uncultivated, Lincoln had a powerful message about the moral evils of slavery. Fortunately, the audience at Cooper Union did not let his appearance stand in the way of his words.

Similarly, you must be willing to set aside preconceived judgments based on a person’s looks or manner of speech. Gandhi was an unimpressive-looking man who often spoke dressed in a simple white cotton cloth. Renowned physicist Stephen Hawking is severely disabled and can speak only with the aid of a voice synthesizer. Yet imagine how much poorer the world would be if no one listened to them. Even though it may tax your tolerance, patience, and concentration, don’t let negative feelings about a speaker’s appearance or delivery keep you from listening to the message.

On the other hand, try not to be misled if the speaker has an unusually attractive appearance. It’s all too easy to assume that because someone is good-looking and has a polished delivery, he or she is speaking eloquently. Some of the most unscrupulous speakers in history have been handsome people with hypnotic delivery skills. Again, be sure you respond to the message, not to the package it comes in.

### **SUSPEND JUDGMENT**

Unless we listen only to people who think exactly as we do, we are going to hear things with which we disagree. When this happens, our natural inclination is to argue mentally with the speaker or to dismiss everything she or he says. But neither response is fair, and in both cases we blot out any chance of learning or being persuaded.

Does this mean you must agree with everything you hear? Not at all. It means you should hear people out *before* reaching a final judgment. Try to understand their point of view. Listen to their ideas, examine their evidence, assess their reasoning. *Then* make up your mind. The aim of active listening is to set aside “one’s own prejudices, frames of reference and desires so as to experience as far as possible the speaker’s world from the inside.”<sup>14</sup> It has been said more than once that a closed mind is an empty mind.

Just as there are organizations devoted to public speaking, so there is a major group devoted to the study of listening. It's called the International Listening Association, and you can visit its Web site at [www.listen.org](http://www.listen.org).

Do you wish you could listen to the words of historical figures such as Amelia Earhart, Winston Churchill, Mohandas Gandhi, and Malcolm X? You can by logging on to The History Channel at [www.history.com/media.do](http://www.history.com/media.do) and clicking on the Great Speeches tab.



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## **FOCUS YOUR LISTENING**

As we have seen, skilled listeners do not try to absorb a speaker's every word. Rather, they focus on specific things in a speech. Here are three suggestions to help you focus your listening.

### **Listen for Main Points**

Most speeches contain from two to four main points. Here, for example, are the main points of a recent speech on controlling the cost of health care delivered by pharmaceuticals executive Robert Ingram:<sup>15</sup>

1. The first priority in reducing the cost of health care is preventing disease.
2. The second priority is providing accurate diagnosis and appropriate treatment.
3. The third priority is being innovative in tackling health problems.

These three main points are the heart of Ingram's message. As with any speech, they are the most important things to listen for.

Unless a speaker is terribly scatterbrained, you should be able to detect his or her main points with little difficulty. Often a speaker will give some idea at the outset of the main points to be discussed in the speech. For example, at the end of his introduction, Ingram said: "I would submit that the solution comes in the form of three very simple, but very important, basic principles." Noticing this, a sharp listener would have been prepared for a speech with three main points. Ingram also gave a preview statement identifying each of the main points before he started the body of his speech. As the speech progressed, he enumerated each point. After this, only the most inattentive of listeners could have missed his main points.

### **Listen for Evidence**

Identifying a speaker's main points, however, is not enough. You must also listen for supporting evidence. By themselves, Ingram's main points are only assertions. You may be inclined to believe them just because they come from a major business executive. Yet a careful listener will be concerned about evidence no matter who is speaking. Had you been listening to Ingram's speech, you would have heard him support his claims with a mass of verifiable evidence. Here is an excerpt:

Seventy-five percent of the total amount we spend in this country on health care is spent on the 45 percent of our population that have one or more chronic diseases. . . .

We need to look at health care spending holistically, recognizing that the biggest slice of the health care pie goes to hospitals at about 31 percent, followed by doctors and clinics

at 22 percent, while spending on prescription drug therapy, including the pharmacist's dispensing fee, accounts for 11 percent of the overall health care bill, which, by the way, is the same percentage that it has been for over forty years.

Payers who cut medicine budgets in isolation—even if they cut their pharmacy spending by half—do nothing to lower the over 90 percent of costs that make up the total health care bill.

There are four basic questions to ask about a speaker's evidence:

Is it *accurate*?

Is it taken from *objective* sources?

Is it *relevant* to the speaker's claims?

Is it *sufficient* to support the speaker's point?

In Ingram's case, the answer to each question is yes. His figures about the amount of money spent on health care in the United States and where that money goes are well established in the public record and can be verified by independent sources. The figures are clearly relevant to Ingram's claim that the cost of prescription drugs is only a small part of total spending on health care, and they are sufficient to support that claim. If Ingram's evidence were inaccurate, biased, irrelevant, or insufficient, you should be wary of accepting his claim.

We shall discuss these—and other—tests of evidence in detail in Chapters 7 and 16. For now, it's enough to know that you should be on guard against unfounded assertions and sweeping generalizations. Keep an eye out for the speaker's evidence and for its accuracy, objectivity, relevance, and sufficiency.

### **Listen for Technique**

We said earlier that you should not let a speaker's delivery distract you from the message, and this is true. However, if you want to become an effective speaker, you should study the methods other people use to speak effectively.

Analyze the introduction: What methods does the speaker use to gain attention, to relate to the audience, to establish credibility and goodwill? Assess the organization of the speech: Is it clear and easy to follow? Can you pick out the speaker's main points? Can you follow when the speaker moves from one point to another?

Study the speaker's language: Is it accurate, clear, vivid, appropriate? Does the speaker adapt well to the audience and occasion? Finally, diagnose the speaker's delivery: Is it fluent, dynamic, convincing? Does it strengthen or weaken the impact of the speaker's ideas? How well does the speaker use eye contact, gestures, and visual aids?

As you listen, focus on the speaker's strengths and weaknesses. If the speaker is not effective, try to determine why. If he or she is effective, try to pick out techniques you can use in your own speeches. If you listen in this way, you will be surprised how much you can learn about successful speaking.

### **DEVELOP NOTE-TAKING SKILLS**

Speech students are often amazed at how easily their teacher can pick out a speaker's main points, evidence, and techniques. Of course, the teacher knows what to listen for and has had plenty of practice. But the next time you get an opportunity, watch your teacher during a speech. Chances are she or he will be listening with pen and paper. When note taking is done properly, it is a surefire way to improve your concentration and keep track of a speaker's ideas.



Research confirms that listening carefully and taking effective notes are vital skills for success in college. They will also benefit you in countless situations throughout life.

The key words here are *when done properly*. Unfortunately, many people don't take notes effectively. Some try to write down everything a speaker says. They view note taking as a race, pitting their handwriting agility against the speaker's rate of speech. As the speaker starts to talk, the note taker starts to write. But soon the speaker is winning the race. In a desperate effort to keep up, the note taker slips into a scribbled writing style with incomplete sentences and abbreviated words. Even this is not enough. The speaker pulls so far ahead that the note taker can never catch up.<sup>16</sup>

Some people go to the opposite extreme. They arrive armed with pen, notebook, and the best of intentions. They know they can't write down everything, so they wait for the speaker to say something that grabs their attention. Every once in a while the speaker rewards them with a joke, a dramatic story, or a startling fact. Then the note taker seizes pen, jots down a few words, and leans back to await the next fascinating tidbit. By the end of the lecture the note taker has a set of tidbits—and little or no record of the speaker's important ideas.

As these examples illustrate, most inefficient note takers suffer from one or both of two problems: They don't know *what* to listen for, and they don't know *how* to record what they do listen for.<sup>17</sup> The solution to the first problem is to focus on a speaker's main points and evidence. But once you know what to listen for, you still need a sound method of note taking.

Although there are a number of systems, most students find the *key-word outline* best for listening to classroom lectures and formal speeches. As its name suggests, this method briefly notes a speaker's main points and supporting evidence in rough outline form. Suppose a speaker says:

Hospitals in the United States are facing a serious shortage of nurses. According to the American Hospital Association, the nurse shortage nationwide has reached an alarming total of 120,000. The National Association of Nurse Recruiters reports that the average hospital has 47 full-time nursing positions vacant. Hospitals in major cities such as New York, Los Angeles, and Miami have had to reduce services because of a lack of nurses.

There are four major causes for this shortage of nurses. One cause is that there are not enough faculty members at nursing schools to train the number of nurses needed by

### **key-word outline**

**An outline that briefly notes a speaker's main points and supporting evidence in rough outline form.**

hospitals. A second cause is that nurses can find employment at medical facilities other than hospitals. A third cause is that many nurses are reluctant to stay on the job because of poor working hours that include nights, holidays, and weekends. A fourth cause is that nurses are burdened with excessive paperwork.

A key-word note taker would record something like this:

Serious nurse shortage  
Total of 120,000  
Average 47 per hospital  
Reduced services at hospitals

Four major causes  
Low faculty at nursing schools  
Employment available beyond hospitals  
Poor working hours  
Excessive paperwork

Notice how brief the notes are. Yet they accurately summarize the speaker's ideas. They are also very clear. By separating main points from subpoints and evidence, the outline format shows the relationships among the speaker's ideas.

Perfecting this—or any other—system of note taking requires practice. But with a little effort you should see results soon. As you become a better note taker, you will become a better listener. There is also a good chance you will become a better student. Research confirms that students who take effective notes usually receive higher grades than those who do not.<sup>18</sup>

## SUMMARY



Most people are poor listeners. Even when we think we are listening carefully, we usually grasp only half of what we hear, and we retain even less. Improving your listening skills can be helpful in every part of your life, including speechmaking.

The most important cause of poor listening is giving in to distractions and letting our thoughts wander. Sometimes, however, we listen too hard. We try to remember every word a speaker says, and we lose the main message by concentrating on details. In other situations, we may jump to conclusions and prejudge a speaker without hearing out the message. Finally, we often judge people by their appearance or speaking manner instead of listening to what they say.

You can overcome these poor listening habits by taking several steps. First, take listening seriously and commit yourself to becoming a better listener. Second, work at being an active listener. Give your undivided attention to the speaker in a genuine effort to understand her or his ideas. Third, resist distractions. Make a conscious effort to keep your mind on what the speaker is saying. Fourth, try not to be diverted by appearance or delivery. Set aside preconceived judgments based on a person's looks or manner of speech.

Fifth, suspend judgment until you have heard the speaker's entire message. Sixth, focus your listening by paying attention to main points, to evidence, and to the speaker's techniques. Finally, develop your note-taking skills. When done properly, note taking is an excellent way to improve your concentration and to keep track of a speaker's ideas.

hearing (48)	critical listening (49)
listening (48)	spare “brain time” (50)
appreciative listening (49)	active listening (55)
empathic listening (49)	key-word outline (59)
comprehensive listening (49)	

## REVIEW QUESTIONS

*After reading this chapter, you should be able to answer the following questions:*

1. What is the difference between hearing and listening?
2. How is listening connected with critical thinking?
3. Why is it important to develop strong listening skills?
4. What are the four main causes of poor listening?
5. What are seven ways to become a better listener?



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For further review, go to the Study Questions in the online Study Aids for this chapter.

## EXERCISES FOR CRITICAL THINKING

1. Which of the four causes of poor listening do you consider the most important? Choose a specific case of poor listening in which you were involved. Explain what went wrong.
2. Using the Listening Self-Evaluation Worksheet on page 54, undertake a candid evaluation of your major strengths and weaknesses as a listener. Explain what steps you need to take to become a better listener.
3. Watch the lead story this week on *60 Minutes*, *20/20*, or another newsmagazine program. Using the key-word outline method of note taking, record the main ideas of the story.
4. Choose a lecture in one of your other classes. Analyze what the lecturer does most effectively. Identify three things the lecturer could do better to help students keep track of the lecture.

## Applying *the Power of Public Speaking*

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Members of your public speaking class have begun making their introductory speeches. You've already given yours and can now relax and watch your fellow students. The first speaker this morning is Nadira, a classmate you don't yet know. She steps confidently to the front of the room, wearing her *Hijab*, the traditional Muslim head scarf.

"Today," Nadira begins, "I would like to tell you about the path that took my family from Egypt to America and me to school at this university. . . ." Soon you realize that you've been thinking about Nadira's clothing, rather than focusing on what she is saying. You pull your attention back, grab your pencil, and try to pick up what she is saying. What else can you do to ensure that you listen effectively to the rest of her presentation?